



Taylor_Smyth architects

SOPHIE NICHOLLS – The GTA Construction Report Special Feature

Whether it's an intimate sleeping cabin in the woods or a vast community centre in the suburbs, when it comes to design, buildings are created and experienced individually on many levels. As an architect, achieving design excellence, while satisfying the needs and aspirations of all those involved in the design and every day use is key.

This approach is the core philosophy behind Toronto-based, Taylor Smyth Architects, a partnership firm led by Michael Taylor and Robert Smyth since 2000.

The pair's professional history and architectural expertise extends back 20 years. Guiding 11 other registered and intern architects, CAD technicians and support staff, their design excellence and superior client service have created buildings of distinction.

"For us, it's about finding innovative solutions to challenging projects, be they private or public. Collaboration is crucial to achieve the ultimate, which is great design. We help develop and manifest our client's goals and inspirations into built form," says Taylor, lead designer of several award-winning projects including The Simple Alternative, a non-profit funeral establishment and the new 58,000 square foot, \$7.8-million Glen Park Public School.

Taylor Smyth's design-orientated team tackles each project the same way, be it a renovation, addition or a new structure conceptualized and built from the ground up. They consider the 'big picture' right down to the finite details, with a strong relationship between the indoor and outdoors always in mind. Natural light and materials, colour and texture, and a connection with nature are fundamental for their project base, which extends from workplace, institutional, commercial and residential designs to feasibility studies, as well as programming and internal needs assessments.

"What's interesting, is that even though the projects vary extensively in type and size, there are certain things they have in common that all speak to the kind of work we do and the way that we see ourselves," explains Taylor.

Embracing challenging projects, Taylor and Smyth both emphasize that the renovation of existing buildings presents a very different set of challenges than does designing and constructing a building from scratch. Collaborative and innovative solutions are essential for these projects, often undertaken while the building remains occupied during construction and often requiring a fast-track approach to design and construction.

Take, for example, their recent work with York University. In direct collaboration with the university, including faculty, maintenance and facilities staff, as well as the various suppliers and trades, Taylor Smyth tackled two intricate fast-track renovation projects; the Osgoode Hall Law School Moot Court Auditorium and the West Office Building Renovation. The former was completed while the building remained in use. The latter is currently under construction.

"These are very interesting projects because, as with many other projects in an academic environment, they have to be done very quickly and there are many challenges working within an environment that is occupied during construction," says Smyth.



Blending Aesthetics With Function

Taylor Smyth Architects

Continued from page B3

The renovation of the Osgoode Hall Moot Court Auditorium, built in the 1960's and part of York University's Law School included detailed coordination with the York Instructional Technology Centre and a select engineering sub-consultant team. Moot Court technical capabilities were enhanced, by incorporating the latest multimedia equipment, and acoustics were improved by working with Engineering Harmonics. Ameresco Canada in collaboration with Metalumen Lighting provided three-dimensional lighting models, illustrating the exact light quality foreseen in the finished project. The new lighting design includes adjustable lighting levels for the more flexible seating configurations and improved sightlines. This now allows for a performance, lecture, or court environment, and can comfortably accommodate a large group of 365 people or smaller groups of 40 to 50 people.

"We worked around all the constraints of the project being contained within one large room in an existing occupied building at the centre of campus. Design and construction was completed within a very quick six month time frame," says Smyth.

The West Office Building was originally built in the mid 1980's. The

renovation that is currently under construction is a project involving direct collaboration with four separate and distinct user groups. After a detailed interview process with each group, Taylor Smyth's vision was to take an enclosed labyrinth-like office environment and create a fresh, open, comfortable workspace with abundant natural light. Using a task-based approach, each group's unique needs will be accommodated and shared meeting and boardrooms provided. With varying ceiling heights ranging from nine to thirteen and a half feet, existing skylights were capitalized on and additional windows were installed to provide natural light and a view for each worker.

"Each group was given their own workplace identity within the overall identity of the university," says Smyth. "People are organized based on their tasks and who they work with, providing an effective and efficient work environment."

As an added bonus for York University, efficient lighting systems including quality light fixtures, varying lamp types and light sensors were incorporated to save energy and money, an approach characteristic of recent Taylor Smyth projects.

"In essence, we provide rich, flexible and more effective workplace environments with effective lighting that has all the qualities of an incandescent environment, while at the same time saving our



clients a lot of money," says Smyth.

Taylor Smyth has built a strong relationship with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), creating engaging environments for children that inspire learning and creativity. Their latest initiative at FH Miller Public School created a new gymnasium and foyer and renovated the entire schoolyard. Working collaboratively with a TDSB Local School Community Design Team, including the local councillor, school principal, teachers, parents and area residents, the original bare, asphalt playground was transformed by adding a new play structure, a soccer field, benches and trees. On a tight budget, they managed to con-

nect the indoors and outdoors with the new gymnasium and foyer that open directly onto the schoolyard.

"When we first visited the school, we felt it needed a significant gathering space to provide a focus, not only for the school, but also for use by the community after hours. They (the community) really pushed for this to happen," says Taylor. "We had to be innovative and inventive at the same time. It's an amazing transformation."

Working in partnership with communities doesn't cease outside the schoolyard. In joint venture with long-term collaborator, David Oleson of Olsen Worland Architect, Taylor Smyth is currently under-

taking a \$10-million addition and renovation to Markham's Centennial Community Centre.

"We pursue projects together with other architects because no one is an expert at everything. Together we make an unbeatable team because so many different areas of expertise are brought together," says Taylor.

While the community centre remains in use, a new health and fitness centre, gymnasium, indoor Bocce courts and other support facilities will be constructed. Glass will be used to open up the environment, both inside and out, and allow people to experience the activities going on around them.

"Right now, it's a very

solid, closed building, which we felt needed to be opened up and updated. We are trying to create something that really draws people in and entices them to use the building in a lot of different ways," says Taylor, adding construction will begin in April 2005, with completion targeted for December 2006.

Reducing energy costs is another strong focus with this project. Working with Enermodal Engineering Ltd., the team discovered that with an additional \$260,000 spent upfront on mechanical and electrical systems, including items such as heat pumps, heat recovery and motion sensors for lighting and plumbing, \$76,000 will be saved each year on energy costs.

"What is amazing is that it shows how enlightened a town like Markham is becoming in terms of energy savings and sustainable design. You can see how it will pay for itself. It's a really great project to illustrate that," says Taylor.

By conducting feasibility studies, Taylor Smyth is involved with a project even before its actual conception. In the past year and a half, Taylor Smyth has undertaken several of these for the City of Toronto together with Oleson Worland. "Feasibility studies provide a blueprint for the neighbourhood. Some people have a problem visualizing what something could be. These studies help create a vision for the community" says Smyth.

"It is as much about designing a good document as it is about designing a good building. These documents become rallying points for the community, helping focus a vision and providing something to



Taylor Smyth Architects

Continued from page B2

aspire to," adds Taylor.

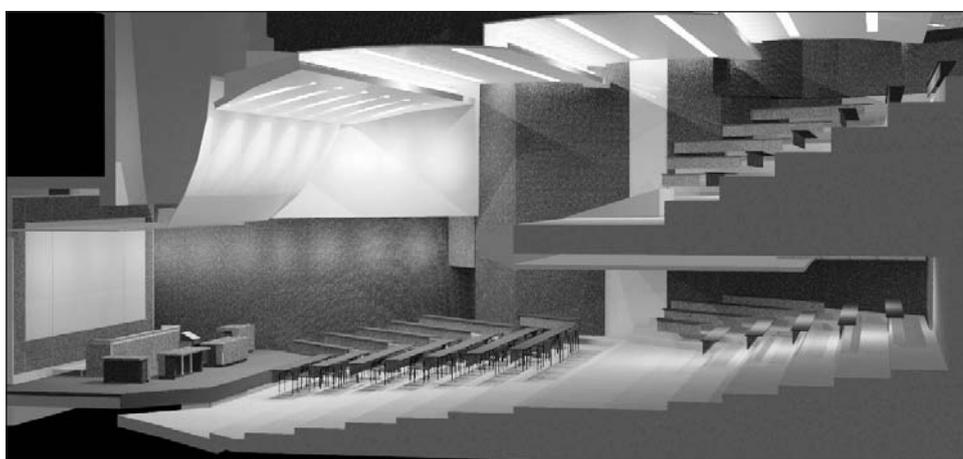
One such feasibility study involves converting an old, abandoned linseed oil factory, built in the early 1900's, into a 58,000 square foot community centre in Parkdale. After analyzing the building and surrounding property, three design/construction scenarios were considered, including: a) Renovating the existing structure; b) Renovating with additions; or c) Demolishing the structure and building a new community centre. While there can be cost savings achieved by reusing existing structures that help to preserve the character of the neighbourhood, there are many factors that help determine the most effective approach, including the availability of capital funds. The feasibility study presented each approach in detail, allowing

the City to establish the most appropriate policy.

Though it may seem Taylor Smyth predominantly perform academic and community-based work, the firm does take on smaller, private projects, as well. Take, for example, the "House on the Ravine" and the "Sleeping Cabin." Both projects involved more intimate collaborations with individual clients, as well as with interior designers and builders.

"Typically, we study the site and talk to the client in great detail about what they like and how they live," says Taylor. "There are quite a number of roll up your sleeves sessions where it's about sketching, talking and going back and forth. Our clients have enormous input into the end result."

The "House on the Ravine," which this year won both a Best Of Canada Award from Canadian Interiors Magazine and a Silver Award from the National Post Design Exchange Awards, is a 7,000 square foot modern home that backs onto a



Toronto conservation area. In collaboration with interior designers Munge/Leung Design Inc. and landscape architect Ron Holbrook of Holbrook and Associates, Taylor Smyth capitalized on the spectacular views using floor to ceiling sliding glass and mahogany doors. Each detail, from the stone, zinc and stucco exterior, to the cantilevered interior steel and walnut staircase and the custom designed millwork inside, were carefully considered in order to create a unified and refined living environment.

"The client wanted the aesthetics of a home studio

to blend in with that of their living spaces, so every detail of the house was thought through," explains Taylor. "Modern houses are much more difficult to build than traditional houses because there is no room for error. The landscape architect and interior designers were incredible to work with. It was an amazing team of people. I can't emphasize enough how important this is." Richard Wilson of Urbacon Ltd. was the construction manager for the house and was hands-on throughout the project to ensure that the exacting requirements of the design were achieved.

The "Sleeping Cabin," an annex to a main cottage on Lake Simcoe, is another prime example of intimate and innovative collaboration between Taylor Smyth, the client and the builder. The client hired The Wood Shop, a group of craftsmen who usually specialize in high end cabinet making and share a working space, and suggested that they first build the one room cabin in a parking lot right outside their shop. This made the construction faster and hence less expensive by eliminating site complications such as sloping,

uneven ground and its remote location. Taylor Smyth and The Wood Shop worked out the details of construction at the shop. The cabin was then disassembled, transported and reassembled in its final location, which, in the words of Taylor, is "all about the view...laying in bed and watching the sunset."

"Those are the kind of

projects we love, where we're really working hand in hand with the builders. In this case, the client's suggestions were right on. He was really excited by the whole process," says Taylor.

This 'hand in hand' approach to fostering client and contractor relationships is a common theme within Taylor Smyth's broad project repertoire that distinguishes the firm. Believing that a project of any scope can offer a unique and memorable experience, with a keen attention to detail and the creative use of materials, Taylor Smyth Architects' designs reach out to clients, users and the general public to create buildings that appeal at many scales and on many levels, both aesthetically and functionally.

